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ABSTRACT

This research brief presents some main findings from a study of employer-based support systems in the United States to help families meet their caregiving responsibilities, and focuses on the failure of existing policies to support caregiving responsibilities of low-income parents and women. The brief also presents policy alternatives to help working families better address their responsibilities. Data sources include primary and secondary data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, the Survey of Midlife in the United States, the Urban Working Families Study, and the National Daily Diaries Study. The brief reports that low-income families are particularly affected by the gap between services provided by government and employers and families' needs. Lower- and middle-income workers spend substantially more time caring for elderly parents than do higher-income families. Employed women are more likely than employed men to provide care for a child, spouse, partner with disability, or elderly relative. The Family and Medical Leave Act covers only about half of U.S. workers and does not cover the common illnesses of young children that cause most parents to miss work. Low-income workers have few or no workforce benefits. Employed mothers are less likely than men to have access to paid leave and flexibility in their hours. Policy recommendations include ensuring preschoolers' care and education, increasing the length of the school day and year, improving public transportation, and adapting work schedules and hours. The brief concludes by noting that developing public policies that cut across social class and help all workers succeed at work and in caring for their families is critical to the welfare of low-income workers and to the advancement of women. (KB)

*This Research-in-Brief was prepared by Hedieh Rahmanou,
IWPR Research Fellow.*

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Research-in-Brief

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October 2001

The Widening Gap: **A New Book on the Struggle to Balance Work and Caregiving**

This Research-in-Brief is based on selected findings from a new book by Jody Heymann, Director of Policy at the Harvard Center for Society and Health. Published by Basic Books in 2000, *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It* reveals the failure of our nation's employer-based support system to help families meet their caregiving responsibilities.

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"Failing to respond to the past century and a half's change in work means that we are failing to meet the essential needs of children and adults in the United States. The gaps in caregiving do not exist because parents work or even because they work hard. The gaps are formed by social conditions that never adapted to the changes in where and how parents work."

-Jody Heymann, *The Widening Gap*

The nature of work changed dramatically in the past two centuries. During the middle of the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution caused men to leave home-based and agricultural work and join the industrial labor force. A second major change occurred during the second half of the twentieth century, when many women moved into the paid labor force.

In response to the Industrial Revolution and as the government recognized that families would become impoverished if family wage earners lost their ability to work, a series of programs such as worker's compensation, unemployment insurance and old age and survivors' insurance were developed. But little or nothing has been done to address the effect of more and more women joining the labor force. Without adequate employer-based and federal policies supporting them, how can workers meet their family caregiving responsibilities when both parents are needed in the labor force?

While *The Widening Gap* examines the need for improved worker support policies in depth, this Research-in-Brief presents some of its main findings, focusing on the caregiving responsibilities of low-income parents and women and the failure of existing policies to support them. It also presents policy alternatives that might help working families better address the many responsibilities facing

them. The principle sources for *The Widening Gap* include analysis of primary and secondary data from the Department of Labor's National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), the Survey of Midlife in the United States, the Urban Working Families Study, and the National Daily Diaries Study.

Differences in Caregiving Work by Income

Low-income families are particularly affected by the gap between services provided by government and employers and families' needs. Even as low- and middle-income families have more caregiving needs to address than high-income families, they have fewer resources with which to address them. The number and severity of health problems among children and the elderly increases as income falls. Mothers who have been on welfare are nearly two times as likely to have a child with a chronic health condition as are mothers who have never received welfare.

Lower- and middle-income workers spend substantially more time caring for elderly parents and parents-in-law than higher-income families (see Figure 1). A full 20 percent of workers in the bottom quartile spend 30 or more hours a week providing such care, compared to only 9 percent of workers in the top income bracket. Those in the bottom income quartile are twice as likely to spend 30 or

more hours providing emotional support for parents or parents-in-law than workers in the highest income bracket (18 percent compared with 8 percent).

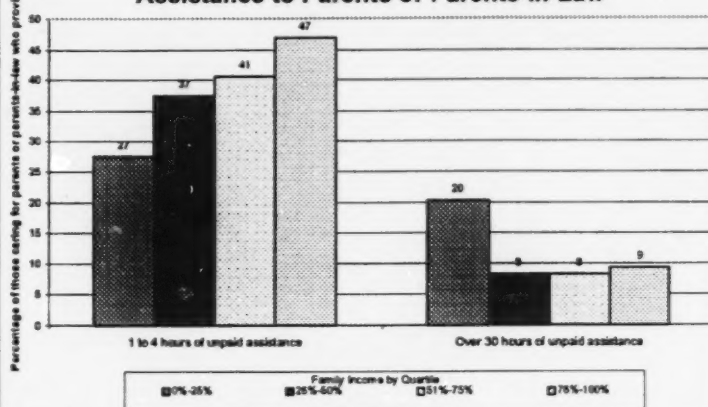
Not surprisingly, low-income workers also spend more time away from work to address these problems. Among low-income workers caring for a disabled adult, nearly half (49 percent) devote at least one working day per month to care for the child's needs; about 15 percent spend more than five days per month on this kind of care. In addition, 45 percent of those caring for a disabled adult and 47 percent of those caring for an elderly adult one working day per month meeting these needs. Among workers with a high school education or less, single parents living in poverty take five times as many days off to take care of their children than do middle- or upper-income earners.

Differences in Caregiving Work by Sex

Like low-income workers, employed women also carry a disproportionate caregiving burden. Employed women are more likely than employed men to provide care for a child, a spouse or partner with a disability, or elderly relatives (see Figure 2). While employed men are more likely than women to spend one to four hours of unpaid assistance or emotional support to parents or parents-in-law, employed women are twice as likely to spend more than 30 hours on this type of care (see Figure 3).

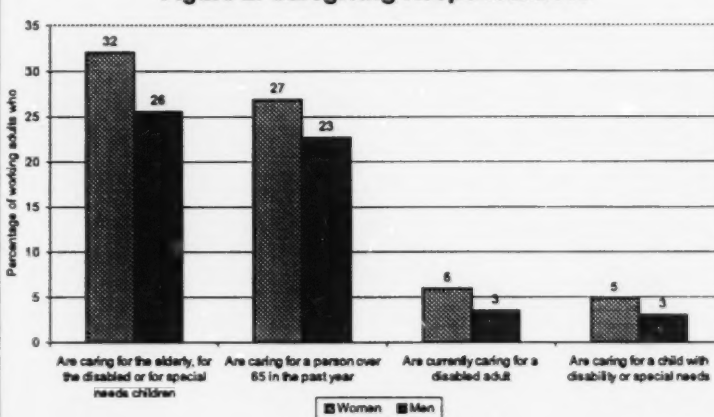
Many of the disadvantages women face in the workplace are directly associated with their disproportionate caregiving responsibilities. Heymann's research shows that a large portion of the pay gap between women and men is connected to their different caregiving roles. Workplaces seldom if ever have policies in place to help workers care for dependents. The lack of community and government support further exacerbates inequalities caused by women's greater responsibility for caregiving. Because of the unequal weight carried by women they are more likely than men to cut back on employment to meet family care needs.

Figure 1. Time Spent Providing Unpaid Assistance to Parents or Parents-in-Law



Source: Heymann, Jody S. 2000. *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families Are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It*. New York: Basic Books.

Figure 2. Caregiving Responsibilities

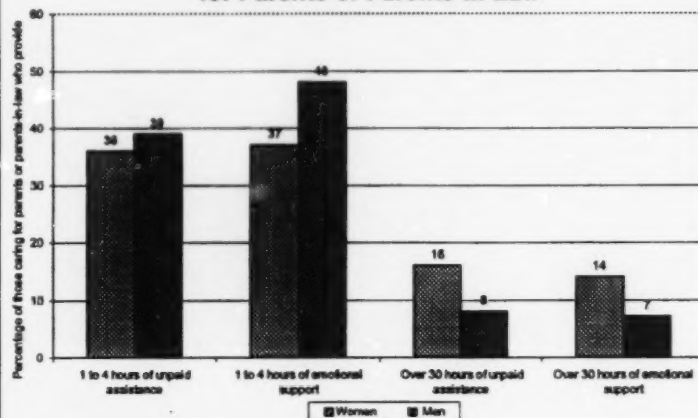


Source: Heymann, Jody S. 2000. *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families Are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It*. New York: Basic Books.

Benefits are Inadequate to Help Low-Income Families

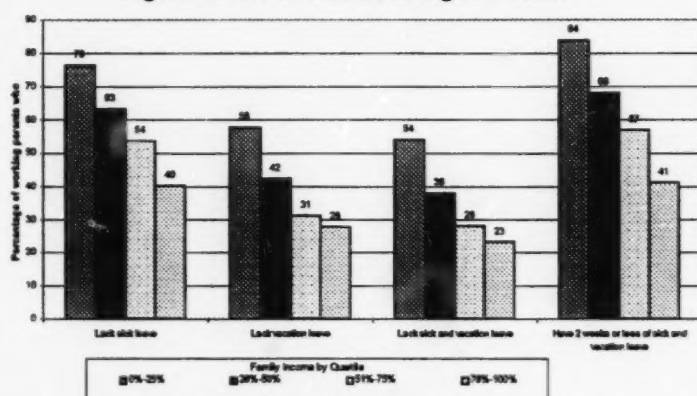
Currently, the only federal legislation designed to address the work-family problem is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Passed in 1993, FMLA requires some employers to provide unpaid job-protected leave under certain sets of circumstances. Half of American workers are not covered under FMLA because they work for small employers, have recently changed jobs, or are part-time workers. Furthermore, FMLA does not cover the common illnesses of young children that cause most parents or guardians to miss work.

Figure 3. Extent of Caregiving for Parents or Parents-in-Law



Source: Heymann, Jody S. 2000. *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families Are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It*. New York: Basic Books.

Figure 4. Lack of Basic Fringe Benefits



Note: Bars represent parents who lacked benefits some or all of the time they worked between 1990 and 1996.

Source: Heymann, Jody S. 2000. *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families Are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It*. New York: Basic Books.

Low-income workers often have few or no workforce benefits, like paid leave or flexible schedules that are essential if workers are to meet the needs of their family members. Paid leave would make it economically possible for workers to spend time away from work in order to address their family's needs. Flexibility would allow workers to meet with teachers, care for sick or disabled family members, and deal with emergencies without having to miss work or go without wages.

Families in the bottom quartile of income are significantly less likely to have access to paid sick leave, paid vacation

leave, or flexible work schedules than families with higher incomes (see Figure 4).¹ More than three fourths (76 percent) of workers in the bottom quartile of family income lack regular sick leave; more than half (58 percent) do not have consistent vacation leave. Families in the bottom income quartile are more likely than other workers to lack *both* sick leave *and* vacation leave.

Low-income families are also less likely to have flexible work schedules. Among low-income parents, 78 percent have jobs that offer no flexibility at all. The majority of workers beneath the median income level say they cannot choose or change their starting and quitting times, or take days off to care for their sick children. Without flexibility in their work schedules or access to paid leave, workers have no choice but to take unpaid leave when family or medical emergencies occur.

Moreover, less than one in ten low-income workers have employer-sponsored child care or child care subsidies. The absence of universal early childhood education programs means that low-income families spend a higher percentage of their earnings on less-adequate child care than do higher-income families. Families living below the poverty line devote one-fourth of their income to child care; families with incomes between 100 and 125 percent of the poverty level spend 16 percent of their income on child care, and non-poor families spend an average only 6 percent of their family income on child care.

Women Have Fewer Needed Benefits

Even as women bear the majority of the responsibility for caring for their families, they are less likely than men to enjoy the benefits of family-friendly policies. Fewer employed mothers have access to paid leave and flexibility in their hours than employed fathers (see Figures 5 and 6). Nearly 60 percent of employed mothers lack sick leave,

¹ Data refer to individuals who lacked leave some or all of the survey period between 1990 and 1996.

and 45 percent have no vacation leave. Forty percent of employed mothers and 30 percent of employed fathers do not have *either* sick leave or vacation leave. Employed mothers are less likely than employed fathers to have the flexibility to decide when to take breaks or when to start and leave work. A majority of employed mothers (53 percent) cannot take days off to care for their sick children.

Inadequate Child Care Policies

Insufficient state and national funding for preschool and school-age care has resulted in growing inequities between low- and middle-income families. Because schools are funded through local property taxes, low- and middle-income districts cannot provide as many services as schools in high-income areas.

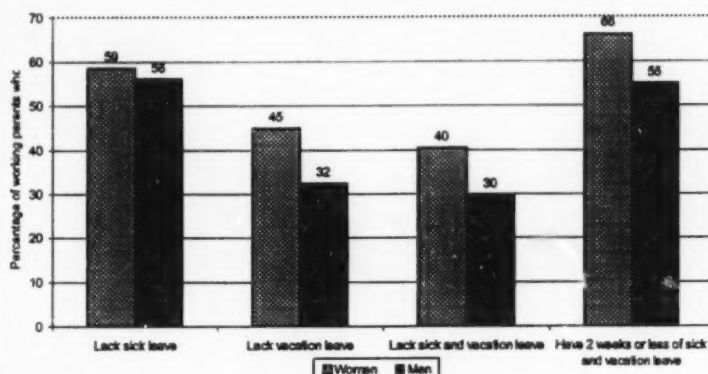
The high cost of child care is especially problematic for low-income families who earn too much to receive government assistance but too little to support themselves. When affordable child care is not available, many working parents have little choice but to leave their children in child care arrangements they find unsatisfactory or home alone. As a result, low-income parents are more likely to interrupt work because of problems with their child care arrangements, or lack thereof. In fact, problems with child care account for one-third of low-income workers' absenteeism, compared to 21 percent for middle- and higher-income parents.

Policy Recommendations

Ensuring Preschoolers' Care and Education

The United States needs to spend more money on early childhood education programs. The benefits of early education programs are well documented and contribute to improved achievement test scores and higher rates of high school graduation. Heymann reports that only half of all 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in formal education programs and many families cannot afford such programs.

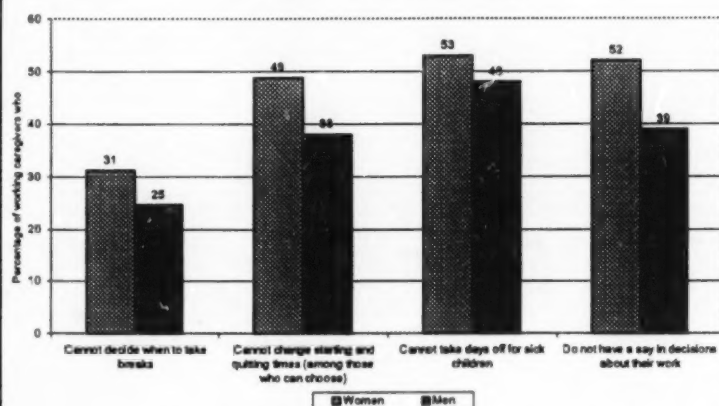
Figure 5. Lack of Basic Fringe Benefits



Notes: Bars represent parents who lacked benefits some or all of the time they worked between 1990 and 1996.

Source: Heymann, Jody S. 2000. *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families Are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It*. New York: Basic Books.

Figure 6. Job Inflexibility



Source: Heymann, Jody S. 2000. *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families Are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It*. New York: Basic Books.

Planning for a Full School Day and Year

Increasing the length of the school day and year would provide quality supervision for children and offer more educational opportunities and enrichment. Most school districts send children home by 3:00 p.m.; few have after-school and/or summer programs for all students.

Recognizing the Needs and Abilities of All Ages

We need to insure there are solutions to the care of all Americans, including the elderly. Policy debate has focused on parental leave for newborns and childcare for young children; however, Americans are caring for a wide range of family members.

Basic Benefits for Working Families

We must ensure all parents have access to paid leave or flexibility either by passing legislation requiring minimum levels of paid leave and flexibility, or providing universal family leave insurance. Regardless of how committed they are to their families, working adults cannot adequately care for family members when special needs arise if they receive no leave from work and do not have flexible work hours.

Transportation

We need to provide better public transportation so that families can utilize the services available to them. One of the most frequent causes of work disruption is inadequate public transportation. Lack of transportation is also one of the most common obstacles to obtaining available services such as after school programs.

Adapting Work Schedules and Hours

We need policies to encourage companies to move to a four-and-a-half day work week so all employees can access services during their half day off; people who must work evenings should be paid more. Many caregivers have no alternative to working evenings, nights, and weekends. This makes it extraordinarily difficult for parents to meet their

families' care needs. At the same time, employees who work traditional hours also face difficulty accessing public services that operate on a nine-to-five schedule.

Improving How We Measure Work Quality

We need to reassess the way we measure the quality and performance of workers. Employers must understand that inadequate public policies make it difficult for workers to manage employment and caregiving responsibilities without having to miss work periodically. "Face time" and willingness to sacrifice family are poor measures of quality. Instead, success must be measured by the caliber of an employee's work performance.

Conclusion

Developing public policies that cut across social class and help all workers succeed both at work and in caring for their families is critical to the welfare of low-income workers and their families, and to the advancement of women.

This Research-in-Brief was prepared by Hedieh Rahmanou, IWPR Research Fellow.

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